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Subject: After Chemical Spill, Poll Finds Most West Virginians Want Tougher Regulations

News Headline: After Chemical Spill, Poll Finds Most West Virginians Want Tougher Regulations |  

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News Text: A large majority of West Virginians think that last month's chemical spill, which left 300,000 residents without access to safe tap water, was a "wakeup call" on the need for better regulations, according to new polling data released Monday.

The poll, conducted by Hart Research Associates and commissioned by the Sierra Club, found that 73 percent of residents polled agreed that the state "has paid too little attention to addressing threats to air and water," and felt that the spill was a signal that "things must change." Seventy percent of the people polled also said they thought other incidents like this would occur if efforts are not made to prevent them.

"What we found was this was a pretty big shock to the system for West Virginians," said Jay Campbell, senior vice president of Hart Research.

In early January, a storage tank leaked 10,000 gallons of a chemical used to wash coal into the Elk River, about a mile upstream from the intake for West Virginia American Water, the largest water utility in the state. Even weeks after the spill, people have remained concerned about the safety of their tap water. Monday's poll, which included 504 registered voters in the state, was conducted Feb. 4-7, nearly a month after the incident.

The poll found a majority of respondents support stronger regulations and enforcement from both the state Department of Environmental Protection and the federal Environmental Protection Agency in order to prevent future incidents like the West Virginia spill. Ninety-seven percent said they support rules that would require regular inspections for all facilities that could contaminate water supplies, and 87 percent said they support stronger water-quality standards related to pollution. Sixty-seven percent said they would support increased involvement of the federal EPA to make ensure that the state is following regulations.

Environmental advocates said the poll demonstrates that even in West Virginia -- a state with a reputation for electing officials that spurn such regulations -- there's support for candidates that embrace tougher rules to prevent this type of incident. Sixty-two percent of the poll's respondents said they are more likely to support a hypothetical candidate who "favors strong regulations and enforcement" to preserve the health and safety of residents, as opposed to a candidate who says regulations are bad for the state economy. That was especially true for Democrats and independents. Republicans in the state were divided on the issue fairly evenly, with 44 percent saying they would support the candidate who was more supportive of regulations and 47 percent saying they preferred the candidate who was less supportive.

Mary Anne Hitt, director of the Sierra Club's Beyond Coal campaign, lives and works in West Virginia. She said that while there have been previous chemical- and coal-related disasters, this one seems to have had a greater influence on public perceptions, largely because it affected so many residents. "I think this spill was of a completely different scale and affected folks in the state capital that hadn't had to deal with the pollution that people in the coal fields deal with," Hitt said.

She said that in many ways, it is like the Cuyahoga River fire in Ohio in 1969. The water of the Cuyahoga River was so polluted that it caught fire, and the event is often cited as a major catalyst for environmental regulations. An event like the spill, Hitt said, "makes people stop and say we need a new way of doing business in this state ... Hopefully this will be a wakeup call so we can stop it from happening again."

